

Blog Out Loud!

I've tried writing this blog a number of times and I've come up with nothing but a few ideas, so I'm now going to make it my job to convey those ideas to you. I feel like I have a sense of responsibility in writing this, which is an unusual task to undertake in recording your personal narrative, but I'm up for the challenge. While I'm not entirely sure my life is so interesting as to warrant a great deal of viewing by potential masses, this blog isn't, at the core, about me, but about the experiences I've had through Poetry Out Loud and its effect on my life. I realize I'm being incredibly vague, but hopefully I'll be able to clarify myself through the course of this series of blogs. More importantly, however, I'll hopefully be able to answer your questions, give you ideas, and provide you with a sense of the importance of a program like Poetry Out Loud. I've been asked by the Arizona Commission on the Arts to write to you, students, teachers, or just the interested parties, on this program that has had a tremendous impact on my life and I feel it my job to do that same program justice. Hopefully I haven't lost you after that paragraph of organizing my thoughts, and onward and upward.

I'll start by introducing myself. My name is Mark Jacobson, and I'm an actor, first and foremost. I've always introduced myself that way not out of a sense of arrogance or bluntness, but simply because it's what I do and who I am. It's what I've always considered to be my passion and it's the craft I will continue to pursue for the rest of my life. It seems that a great number of people are faced with the incredibly straining and difficult task of deciding what they want to do with their lives, what direction they want to take in heading down the long and winding road; I, however, am one of the lucky ones, so to speak. I've always been fortunate enough to know that the stage is where I'm most comfortable, theatre being the realm in which I can best communicate and, beyond that, grow as an artist and a person. I could get into a lengthy diatribe about the art of theatre and its importance in a social context, but that's not really why you're here. I write to you from the University of Southern California where I am presently a freshman, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in both Theatre and Broadcast Journalism. I won't resort to a propaganda campaign for USC simply because it isn't necessary, but just know,

contextually, that this is the perfect fit for me. Now that you know where I presently stand (or sit, as the case may be, since I'm ridiculously long-winded and this blog would result in a lot of standing), let's take a trip backwards in time.

My interest in poetry was first peaked at Royal Palm Middle School, when I experienced my first of what would become a number of poetry units throughout my secondary education. It was by no means a thorough exploration into the intricacies of poetry as I sat in my 8th grade English class, but the one message that I left with was one that I still value, that being that poetry itself is an art form. In the unit, we researched a number of authors, the events of their lives and the subsequent poetry that emerged as a result of their experience. To me, it seemed that poetry was able to do so many things that numerous art forms attempted to do; essentially, it combined the best of all forms. Like a painting, poetry could paint an elaborate picture, a rich tapestry with intricate designs that flowed seamlessly into the minds of the reader. The unique aspect of this feature, however, was that everyone saw a personally-interpreted picture. Like great literature, poetry had the ability to convey a time period, to tell a story within its narrative qualities, a story that, when written with the rich emotions of the author, seemed not only *worth telling*, but that *needed to be told*.

To reveal poetry's potential to embody my personal favorite art form, I had to wait until high school, where my "proper" poetry education began. At Arizona School for the Arts, where I was able to pursue my passion for theatre while receiving a wonderful academic experience, I was provided with an incredible mentor, my Freshman/Sophomore year English teacher, Sean Ross. In Mr. Ross' class, we took on poetry (and a number of topics, for that matter) in greater depth than I'd ever experienced. With analysis of the poetry and extended discussion on symbolism from the greats throughout history, I began to see poetry's most powerful potential: it could come to life. What I find so beautiful about theatre is that it's what I consider to be a "living art form," in that each show, each performance is fundamentally different, with different interpretations of character, of meaning, of theme. A piece of theatre can represent so many things to so many people, regardless of the playwright's intention and I find that absolutely stunning.

Poetry, too, has this same ability. The true wonder of Poetry Out Loud, the brilliance of the concept, is that the program not only allows for this, but encourages it, embraces it, and as a result, produces an incredibly enriching experience. When the opportunity for Poetry Out Loud came to ASA in my junior year, I jumped at the chance to bring poetry to life, through my own vision and interpretations of pieces. In my junior year, the 2005-2006 school year, Poetry Out Loud was brand new and very few schools around the valley knew about it. It was a concept that required more student involvement than simply studying for a spelling bee, burying your head in a dictionary for hours at a time and hopefully emerging with the proper spelling for sarsaparilla. (That is by no means any sort of insult to spelling bee contestants, as I still proudly display my Royal Palm spelling bee champion trophies in my room at home. In saying that here, I feel kind of lame, but it's one of those nerdy accomplishments you have to feel secretly cool about, even if it isn't socially acceptable/merit-worthy. Stay strong, secret spellers.) Poetry Out Loud required dedication from the participants, to commit challenging, often times lengthy verse to memory, meanwhile adding your own intonation, your own personal back story to infuse the poem with flavor.

My junior year, the poem I chose for my school competition was *Jabberwocky*, by Lewis Carroll. Let me put it on record now that, if you've been considering that poem as one of your competition pieces (I'm honestly unsure if it's in the anthology this year, as I know they have the tendency to change poems around to keep things fresh), know that it's entirely possible you won't be the only one. For reference, I was one of four kids at my school who tried the poem and one of three who recited it at the State Competition. [See Tips #1 & 2]

Winning my school competition was really unexpected and incredibly thrilling, as I now had the opportunity to compete at the state level for a trip to Washington, D.C. and the opportunity to participate in the national contest. While I wish I could say everything went beyond swimmingly at that contest, the actual result was far from the truth. My primary setback at that competition was that, due to a breakdown in communication, I wasn't aware that I needed **two poems** for the state competition until two days before the contest. As one normally does in an unnecessarily panicked state, I...well...panicked.

I spent hours digging through the anthology online, trying to find a poem which I could identify with and personalize that could also be memorized in time for the competition. This unwise approach to the competition led to my selection of *O Captain, My Captain*, by Walt Whitman. In truth, I picked the poem because it was referenced in my favorite movie of all time, *Dead Poet's Society* (A must-see, I highly recommend it).

Unfortunately, that wonderful poem did not result in a wonderful recitation for me, as I was just unprepared when it came time to do my second poem. Any confidence I had taken from my recitation of *Jabberwocky* in the first round evaporated just in time for the second round. My memorization was shaky at best, I didn't entirely have direction for the piece, and I never really allowed myself time to understand what is widely-perceived to be one of the greatest, most historically relevant poems ever written. We can call that entire experience my POL Nightmare. [See Tip #3]

My senior year seemed like it went by in an instant (and none too soon, as I fully admit to having a very serious case of senioritis) and, before I knew it, it was time for Poetry Out Loud once more. This time, however, I had an advantage over the competition to an extent. While it's a complete cliché, it is true that failure makes for a great teacher. While I'm sure I felt unjustly robbed after the first competition (which really wasn't true, but that's what one does in a competitive environment in order to justify oneself), I understood the competition better, and I had a stronger game plan going into it. My primary goal of senior year was to enjoy myself, and I extended that personal mission into Poetry Out Loud, as I looked forward to my second experience at the state level.

There is the tendency to take a competition far too seriously and, for those competitively-minded souls, it's all but impossible not to. While I approached the experience with a winning attitude, I by no means went into it looking to demolish the competition (plus, you can't really demolish the competition, since you aren't directly competing *against* them. You can play out those fun scenarios in your head, but in terms of productivity, it's not terribly useful). I entered the competition with the strong resolve that I wanted to do my poems justice. I was proud of the interpretations I had made and the pieces I had chosen. I picked pieces that I enjoyed reading, reciting, and telling, and I didn't allow myself to take everything too seriously. I engaged myself emotionally with

the work, but rather than forcing myself on the poems, I let them speak for myself. Those poems, *Hysteria*, by Dionisio D. Martinez, and *Discrimination*, by Kenneth Rexroth, did the talking.

As a result, I was handed a plane ticket to Washington, D.C. and an opportunity that most certainly changed my life. You'll hear about that next time (along with as many helpful pointers as I can think of in aiding you in your search to find the perfect poem). Thanks for listening.

MJ

Tips on Poetry Out Loud

1. Venture for a poem off the beaten path

I suggest this as a tip because the students who are unfamiliar with poetry, or who have had limited experience in the past, will search out poems or authors that they recognize for whatever reason. As a result, a number of classic poems that are included in the anthology will be heard repeatedly over the course of the competitions. It's great that there are poems that have withstood the test of time to become so famous as to warrant identification by masses young and old but this takes attention away from equally (if not moreso) interesting pieces by lesser known authors. I fully admit that the popularity was what first drew me to *Jabberwocky*. The poem had been a great childhood memory of mine and I associated with it immediately. When I got to the State Competition and looked in the program to find that a few other students were venturing their own attempts at what I considered to be *my* poem (you have to take ownership in these things, obviously), it added another layer of unnecessary pressure. It's hard enough to compete with others in a contest that can seem so subjective, but it's even worse if the judges are forced to determine between three interpretations of the same poem. For your benefit, and the judges', search for a poem that you'd never heard.

In suggesting a poem that you aren't familiar with, I bring up another point that deserves to be separated from my jargon.

2. Make the poem an interesting and engaging experience for YOU

While I personally never got tired of reading *Jabberwocky*, mainly because it was just such a fun piece, there is such a tendency to make a poem which you're familiar with become second-nature to you. This is a terrible mistake to make, as it allows the poem to get stale within you. By choosing a poem with which you're not too familiar, it forces you, the reader, to pay attention to the words, to interpret it differently and to read it in a number of ways. If you do choose a poem that you've known before, do yourself the courtesy of rereading it as though you didn't know it, as though you'd never heard it. Even if you're convinced you know the poem backwards and forwards, it's almost more

incentive to go back and read it, as nothing can refresh your opinion of a poem like finding a hidden nugget within the text, something you can explore that puts the poem in an entirely different perspective for you.

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Though it was traumatizing in one respect, it taught me a valuable lesson, beyond making sure I am well-versed in the logistics of the competition, my third point to stand out from the crowd.

3. Time is of the essence, so don't forget to utilize it

I had had plenty of time to prepare a second poem but, because I was unaware, I flopped. Also, even though I found out with short notice, I spent the majority of my time worrying about the number of ways I could easily butcher the poem and ruin my

chances, rather than approaching it methodically, as I did Jabberwocky. While I'm not saying that you can get away with preparing a competition-ready poem in two days (I'm sure the more naturally gifted probably can, though I still wouldn't encourage it), two days is enough time to sufficiently analyze and understand the poem. As well as I prepared for Jabberwocky was as terrible as I prepared for *O Captain, My Captain*, and the worst artistic guilt you can have is not honoring a poem of that caliber with a faithful recitation. While I'm not sure I lost sleep over the whole ordeal (aside from those two nights of frantic preparation), I was kicking myself in hindsight because I could have been more professional about it.

Basically, I'm telling you to learn from my mistake. Use whatever time you have to prepare as best you can and you'll surely do better than I did. I focused solely on memorizing and barely bothering to evaluate the poem and the result was that I didn't know the poem or what it was about. Having a few years under my belt, I can safely say that it's infinitely easier to memorize when you know what it is you're trying to say. If you learn the basic story and the basic emotion, the words will follow. That's the true essence of placing yourself in the mindset of the poem, of becoming the storyteller. While you are judged on accuracy, your primary goal is a faithful recitation of the story, the emotion, the feeling the author is trying to convey. While the words are very carefully chosen and should, therefore, be treated with the utmost care, the author is writing the poem for a *reason*, and it is that *reason* that you must uncover in order to be successful.

MJ

To Those Who Are About to Recite, I Salute You

My name is Mark Jacobson and after today's competition, I will no longer be the reigning Arizona State Poetry Out Loud Champion. I suppose it then goes without saying that I was fortunate enough to be awarded both the fabled trip to Washington, D.C. last March and the opportunity to compete at the national level representing Arizona. I address you today, however, with what I hope will turn out to be some form of wisdom from the perspective of an alumnus.

My involvement with Poetry Out Loud has spanned three school years, a few blog entries, five poems, seven rounds, and countless hours of preparation, and it remains to this day one of my proudest experiences. In writing this message, I have no choice but to reflect back on this truly unique program and just how thankful I am to have found it. While I never considered myself terribly gifted at writing poetry (beyond the basic pre-teen ramblings that, at the time, seemed to completely embody the spirit of my angst), I had always held this tremendous respect and appreciation for poetry as an art form. I, by craft, am an actor, so I found the prospect of recitation particularly enlightening. I find that locating the voice of the poet within the poem, hearing the words as they are meant to be spoken, may be the most difficult challenge which poetry presents and yet, at the same time, the most liberating opportunity. Yes, the author wrote the poem with specific intention but, as you will no doubt see in today's recitations, those words can take many shapes. It is the finest tribute to the students participating today that they have been able to locate that voice within themselves and in honor of that accomplishment, I offer my sincerest congratulations.

It's not difficult to dismiss a contest like this as simply the regurgitations of the words of an astonishing number of deceased writers (I'm sure someone at the Poetry Foundation who happened to read that may have fallen out of a chair at my bold words, but I continue no less). Indeed, it is entirely possible that some of the students who vied for the spots in this competition had no moment in which the poem registered within them, no moment in which they reached a personal connection to the art form which will be on proud display today (I'm too aware of that likelihood to plead ignorance, I was, after all, in

high school too). The reality of the situation, however, is that those students, who have made it this far, and those who will advance to the national competition, are of a very special breed, if I may say so. They are students who have reached a certain level of wisdom beyond their years and have acquired quite the refined taste because, frankly, poetry isn't easy.

It's misleading to look in an anthology of poetry, as one's first assumption may not be that these are works of beauty, but that there simply aren't enough words to consider these works merit-worthy. For what we'll call the uncultured eye, unless there flows sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph, page after page of sweeping literary grandeur, the written word simply cannot be beautiful. Thus is the misunderstood curse of poetry. To me, however, the true beauty is found in poetry's simplicity. That is not to say that there aren't some terribly long, equally respectable poems out there (you've got to give credit to Homer, in that regard), but, generally, poetry is able to achieve something quite remarkable in a stunningly small word count. The precision of language demonstrated in poetry, the ability to depict a glorious narrative, to embody a spirit, to explore the unknown with such verbal economy is yet another of poetry's feats.

I suppose I could elaborate further in my quixotic stupor, but that has its own time and place outside of the confines of your program. I cannot stress enough the amount of pride I take in having competed with Poetry Out Loud. While I may have been what could be considered an "amateur poetry enthusiast," I was completely unaware of the profound effect poetry would have on my life as a result of this program. I am still realizing the benefits today, now a freshman in college, and I expect that, over time, I will uncover further the ways in which I was impacted by the art form. What I mean to say is that this experience is perpetual. While this competition may seem to be the end for those who do not advance to the national competition, I'm not entirely sure that Poetry Out Loud is one of those things that will ever fully leave you. I'm reminded of the Poetry Out Loud favorite, Forgetfulness, by Billy Collins, in thinking of the potential that the words of the poem slowly leave the minds of contestants as time goes on, but the work that was done, the connection which was made, will always remain in tact. So too will the ability to appreciate poetry, as it is quite difficult to close that floodgate once opened.

This competition has grown to soaring heights in its brief lifespan and I am entirely privileged to have taken part in what I hope will grow to be an internationally-acclaimed contest. To reach this point, to make it this far, the students competing have been able to achieve something a number of adults in society haven't been able to do, and that is to develop and nurture a fondness and appreciation for the arts. It is a testament not just to the character of the students but to the schools, to the families, and to the teachers of these students, and there should be no shortage of pride on any account. Poetry Out Loud is an experience that changes lives; it is worth the support, and it is most certainly worth the time and dedication. While I will constantly refer to Poetry Out Loud as rewarding, I don't mean just the material gain. I could, after all, regale you with stories of the luxurious accommodations in Washington, D.C., of the catered luncheons and dinners, but I could just as easily tell you about sitting in the lobby of the hotel with other state champions, when all of the formal competitions had ended, discussing art and the importance of poetry, discussing the motivation behind the words of these authors, and truly feeling like a part of something bigger, a part of something of which to be proud. For those of you competing today, you are a member of that something, of that movement of youth who have not allowed yourselves to be satisfied with simply regurgitating the words but making them your own, speaking them how they were meant to be spoken, honoring the craft, and infusing a passion of which you had never known you were capable. Harness it, cherish it, carry it with you in everything you do, and don't let yourself forget that it was poetry, this art form of simplicity, that was your enabler.

You are about to witness what will no doubt be a phenomenal demonstration of students breathing life into art. Consider yourself very, very lucky.

Mark Jacobson